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ABSTRACT

A series of U.S. Department of Education grants has enabled the University of Kentucky to deliver a graduate program on low incidence disabilities to students in rural areas via distance education. In 1989, the initial Training Rural Educators in Kentucky (TREK) project involved physically moving coursework to rural London, Kentucky. In subsequent years, satellite and compressed video technology were added, the number of project sites was increased, a team teaching model was introduced, and expert guest lecturers were added. Practica have been supervised at the distance sites throughout the program's history. Lessons learned during the 10 years of the program are discussed. These include: (1) get everything in writing before starting; (2) the bottom line for a university is money; (3) higher enrollment is a mixed blessing; (4) do not expect change overnight; (5) some technologies are more appropriate than others, and sometimes technology is not appropriate at all; (6) distance learning students may have different expectations than their on-campus counterparts; (7) the quality of coursework does not have to change when distance learning technology is used; (8) scheduling distance learning courses can be a nightmare; (9) everything that can go wrong will go wrong; and (10) do not take anything for granted. Continual evaluation of regional, institutional, and student needs is of prime importance, and due to constantly developing technology, one must embrace an attitude of change and good humor. A table presents variables in the evolution of TREK distance learning projects, categorized by geographic, institutional, and student needs. (TD)

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TEN YEARS OF DISTANCE LEARNING: CHANGING TO MEET GEOGRAPHICAL, INSTITUTIONAL, AND STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Since its inception in 1984, the Developmental and Behavioral Disorders (DBD) program at the University of Kentucky (Schuster, Collins, Nelson, Gast, & Wolery, 1991), a graduate program that focuses on Moderate/Severe Disabilities (MSD), has trained over 100 teachers. Since the vast majority of these teachers have returned to rural regions, the program has developed three major objectives to enable graduates to best meet the needs of their school districts. These include preparing graduate level personnel to (a) work in diverse settings with persons who exhibit developmental and behavioral disorders, (b) provide consultation, inservice training, and information dissemination related to serving persons with developmental and behavioral disorders, and (c) analyze and conduct applied research with persons who exhibit developmental and behavioral disorders.

In addition to the on-campus program, the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling (EDSRC) has extended the outreach of the DBD program by offering distance learning classes through the Training Rural Educators in Kentucky (TREK) projects (Collins, 1997; Collins, Hemmeter, Schuster, & Stevens, 1996; Grisham-Brown, Knoll, Collins, & Baird, 1998; Schuster et al., 1991). The TREK programs have enabled rural special education teachers and related service delivery personnel (e.g., speech/language pathologists) to come together in small groups in rural communities to complete degree, certification, and/or teaching advancement coursework through distance learning technology (i.e., satellite, compressed video).

Whether students are enrolled in an on-campus or off-campus master's program, they complete a minimum of 36 hours of graduate coursework that includes a minimum of 9 hours of practica, 3 hours of thesis research, and 6 hours of elective coursework (selected from courses offered outside of the EDSRC). Regardless of the graduate program, all students must complete a series of courses that are driven by a philosophy in applied behavior analysis.

History of Distance Learning at the University of Kentucky

Our distance learning program began in 1989 with a personnel preparation grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The purpose of this initial TREK grant was to provide our graduate low incidence program to students in rural areas. This was accomplished by physically moving coursework to London, Kentucky. One faculty member delivered coursework in person at a site located approximately 75 miles from campus. An additional grant employee provided on-site practica supervision of students in their own classrooms. This program, though far from allowing access to most of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, did help us to provide distance learning coursework to a number of students who would not have been able to commute to campus.

Following this initial attempt, a subsequent grant, TREK-DL (distance learning) was received from the U. S. Department of Education to continue our distance learning program in low incidence disabilities. With the initiation of this grant, our graduate coursework in low incidence disabilities was provided through satellite and compressed video (interactive television) technology. One instructor taught coursework on-campus, and it was "beamed" to as many as six sites throughout rural Appalachia.

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Viewing sites included community colleges in the eastern, southern, and southeastern parts of the State. Students continued to be provided with on-site practica supervision. This program certainly enabled students to complete coursework without coming to campus. However, the TREK program still had drawbacks. For example, students had access to a very limited number of faculty members, coursework was not interactive (students had to call in comments or questions at designated points in time), and often faculty spoke to empty on-campus classrooms since the off-campus and on-campus programs operated separately).

Given these drawbacks, a third grant (also TREK-DL) was submitted and subsequently funded through the U. S. Department of Education which further assisted us in refining and expanding our distance learning program. This program expanded our distance learning graduate program in low incidence disabilities by having the program be viewed in additional sites throughout the Commonwealth. Up to eight different sites received coursework through distance learning. TREK-DL also allowed us to refine our program by continuing to offer coursework through satellite technology and adding more coursework using compressed video technology. The latter allowed faculty and students to continually see one another and allowed students an immediate means to ask and answer questions and to participate in discussions in a timely manner. In addition, TREK-DL adopted a team teaching model for all courses using DL faculty and on-campus faculty. All courses were taught through team teaching (Collins et al., 1996) with both on- and off-campus students attending courses together. Practica supervision continued to be supervised at distance sites. Although students across the state had greater access to our graduate program in low incidence disabilities, we thought we could further develop our program to meet the changing needs of our students, faculty, college, university, and state.

Therefore, we submitted yet a fourth distance learning grant. Fortunately, we received the TREK-CR (Collaborative Relationships) grant from the U. S. Department of Education in 1998. This grant created some additional challenges for us that, hopefully, will continue to provide more refined distance learning opportunities for our faculty and our students. In this latest grant, we have implemented several additional variables. First, we are requiring students to attend some on-campus activities (e.g., practica meetings, orientation meetings) so that they will be exposed to each other and additional faculty. Second, we are trying to rid our students of the isolation they experience by pairing them with current or former students in their region and requiring cross program visitation. Third, given our limited resources as a faculty, we are providing guest lecturers from noted experts across the country via distance learning technology. Fourth, we have completely merged our off- and on-campus programs. We now only have one program – students just attend classes in different locations. Fifth, we have received more of a financial commitment from our distance learning office that will, hopefully, become permament. These are just some of the changes we have made over the 10 years we have had TREK. The following section will describe, in detail, the variables that affected our evolution in delivering distance learning in low incidence disabilities.

Variables in the Evolution of Distance Learning at the University of Kentucky

As our distance learning program has evolved, we have tried to be sensitive to the variables the have affected our ability to efficiently deliver an effective, high caliber program. We have viewed distance learning as a dynamic process. Just as we train our students to use data-based instruction, we have tried to collect and analyze project data and to make modifications based on that data. Over the past 10 years, we have found that areas we have identified for improvement have fallen into categories of (a) geographic needs, (b) institutional needs, and (c) student needs. The following table shows how our project has evolved as we have attempted to address each category of need across project cycles.

Variables in the Evolution of the TREK Distance Learning Projects

Project	Type of Need	Specific Project Need	How Project Need Was Addressed
TREK (1989-92	Geographic	Need to provide specialized graduate level certification training in Appalachian region of state	On-site distance learning classes in centrally located site with supplemental on-site supervision of practica
TREK-DL (1) (1992-95)	Geographic	Need to serve more students across larger geographic area	Courses changed from on-site to delivery via distance learning technology (primarily satellite supplemented by compressed video)
	Student	Need for student exposure to more faculty	Recruitment of more faculty to teach distance learning courses
		Need for student interactions with other students	Simultaneous delivery of on- and off-campus courses
		Need for instructor assistance in teaching merged on- and off-campus	Adoption of team teaching model
TREK-DL (2) (1995-1998)	Institutional	Need for sharing of resources across state institutions	Collaborative multi-university course in transdisciplinary services
	Institutional	Need for improvement in delivery technology	Addition of more compressed video course delivery
	Institutional	Need for project assessment data to refine program	Follow-up surveys of distance learning students
	Student	Need for student tuition stipends not reliant on grant support	Students connected with state certification funding sources
	Student	Need for students to be a part of the campus program	Required campus presentations and meetings
	Student	Need for student training in distance learning skills	Article written by instructors for entering students
TREK-CR (1998-2001)	Geographic	Need for state network of professionals to combat isolation	Cross-program visitation requirement for students
	Geographic	Need for isolated students to have exposure to national expertise	National guest lecturer presentations added to courses through distance learning technology
	Institutional	Need for faculty/staff trained in distance learning skills	Creation of distance learning doctoral program
	Institutional	Need for more options of interaction and delivery	Addition of support materials using the internet

	Institutional	Need for more program funding not reliant on grant support	Funding formula based on number rather than course
	Institutional	Need for university commitment to distance learning regardless of grant funding	Faculty retreat resulting in formal commitment to institutionalize core courses
	Student	Need for content support and expertise on distance learning sites	Employment of former students as site facilitators
	Student	Need for creation of special education network to overcome isolation	Cross program visitations between students
	Student	Need for ongoing support during thesis research	Creation of thesis seminar

Discussion

Over the 10 years of delivering distance learning in the area of low incidence disabilities, whether through our "crude" efforts at "driving to the students" or through our high tech efforts to provide nationally distinguished lecturers to our students, we have learned, we think, some valuable lessons.

Get everything in writing before you start anything. This is one of the most valuable lessons we have learned. Although we do not think we are naïve, people make commitments easily in the planning stages but often do not follow through. For example, our university made a financial commitment to parts of two salaries on our latest grant. However, after the initial semester of the project, the university decided they would financially commit based on the number of students enrolled. To date, this has not been a problem and, although our university states that they will honor their initial commitment, changing the rules mid-stream provides for some tense moments.

The bottom line for a university is money. This is especially true when trying to institutionalize a program. In our first several grants (when the university did not have much of a commitment), the university did not notice or count our numbers very often. However, with the growth of distance learning and the competition for time slots for the use of technology, the university is now concerned with numbers. We, as faculty, need to obtain additional resources through grants and use already established state programs to obtain student tuition. For example, in Kentucky the state department awards traineeship money to teachers certified in other areas who are seeking new certification in low incidence disabilities. We need to make sure our students know about these funds (of which they are often unaware). Additionally, we need to have in place on-going, effective recruitment policies and practices to maintain acceptable enrollment numbers.

Higher enrollment is a mixed blessing. Although increased numbers provide some type of program security, those numbers (a) increase faculty workload, (b) decrease one-to-one contact between the faculty member and the student, and (c) may result in a decline in quality assessment. Our purpose is to train certified teachers in low incidence disabilities; however, some of our classes can be taken by teachers working on rank programs at other universities and in other areas. What we have tried to accomplish is to recruit heavily in "general" courses such as Introduction to Special Education and Legal Issues in Special Education. By having many non-certification students, visiting students, and students from other universities in these classes, we increase our numbers to get our university funding. However, these students are not "our" students and therefore do not require the amount of advising and commitment that our certification students require. In addition, this practice allows us not to be as worried about enrollment in our certification courses since the numbers are offset by the students in the general courses.

Do not expect things to change overnight. Many individuals, including staff, faculty, and students, are wary of distance learning. Faculty resistance frequently has occurred. Teaching in a distance learning classroom with cameras, monitors, and other equipment makes teaching different in those environments. Some people, we have found, just are not good distance learning faculty. There are personality variables that affect the success of this type of teaching. However, we have found that, sometimes, resistance can recede through team teaching methods and additional exposure to the technology. Staff can be resistant since distance learning requires much more work. Staff need to complete different forms, work with different campus offices, and communicate with many other sites and people that they would not normally have to do with on-campus classes. If you, as a faculty member, know all the new staff responsibilities, you can initially act as a buffer between staff and the new rules, regulations, and people. University and state policies also can be resistant to distance learning. There are regional boundaries in our state associated with each university. Stepping outside of our university's service area and into another university's service area to provide coursework has been a long and tedious process at times that has required involvement from our central administration.

You do not have to use technology just because it exists. Some courses are not delivered appropriately as internet courses. Other courses are not appropriate to deliver through satellite technology but may be appropriate for delivery via compressed video. Sometimes technology is not appropriate at all. We have found, and research confirms, that face-to-face on-campus communication is a very important factor when delivering distance learning. It allows relationships to be developed between students and between faculty and students and also allows students to have an on-campus orientation.

Distance learning students may have different expectations than their on-campus counterparts. They often have different expectations and different motivations for completing the program. Sometimes distance learning "spoils" students. For example, we had students attending class in a site approximately 75 miles from campus. The distance learning room had been reserved a year in advance for another conference for two sessions of class. Our students were informed that they would have to travel to another site that was located about 20 miles away for those sessions. Many students were very unhappy about the additional travel. Since distance learning technology can bring our program so close to our students' homes, their expectations about what a university should provide is quite different, at times, from an on-campus student. In addition, when compared to their on campus colleagues, distance learning students are generally older, come from different cultural backgrounds, often have different work experiences, and rarely, if ever, attend school full-time. These factors present different expectations for the operation of our program.

Quality of coursework does not have to change when distance learning technology is used. We often hear from faculty that the quality will suffer when using distance learning technology. Although using distance learning may have quirks that are not associated with on-campus instruction, we have maintained, we think, our quality of the program. We have continued our thesis requirement and have the same grade expectations for off-campus students as we have for on-campus students. However, some flexibility is required. For example, if our technology fails, rather than "writing the night off", we send students tapes of the lecture they missed. If 4 out of 40 readings do not show up in their site library, rather than say that those few do not constitute a majority of what we want learned (which would be easy to do), we make sure they get copies of any missed readings before evaluating their knowledge of the content of those readings.

Scheduling distance learning courses can be a nightmare. Trying to coordinate between on-campus time slots and classes, the distance learning office, the receiving sites, and the distance learning classrooms is tedious and competitive. In addition, varying time zones may be involved. We have learned that you have to look out for yourself and your program. Get your requests in a year in advance. Make sure you have a on-going relationship with personnel in your distance learning office. Never give

up a time slot. Make sure that you have something to place in any time slot you have previously used. Once you give up a time slot, it is difficult to re-establish that slot. Working with your competitors over available time slots is necessary. Not all your courses have to be conducted through compressed video, if you have other technologies available to you. Prioritize the courses that need satellite (one-way visual, one-way audio) and compressed video (two-way visual, two-way audio) modes. In addition, try to schedule courses that meet periodically (e.g., practica, thesis seminar) at non-prime time hours.

Everything that can go wrong will go wrong. Among other things, technology fails, readings in remote libraries disappear, and assignments are lost. We have learned that being fully prepared is not good enough. Contingency plans are needed for a variety of situations and problems.

Do take anything for granted. This is the final lesson we have learned and includes university support, regional accreditation, demand for coursework, and even student etiquette while in distance learning classrooms. During our TREK programs, our regional accreditation agency lost our accreditation paperwork (as did our central office administrators), university support has swung like a pendulum, and demand for coursework is dependent on recruiting and advertising. In addition, we have developed and written an article that we require our distance learning students to read, that describes how to be a good distance learner (Collins, Grisham-Brown, & Schuster, 1999). Although some may think the article is simplistic, it was written in response to student behavior we observed.

Conclusion

In summary, we think we have learned much during 10 years of experience in a constantly evolving distance learning program that may be of value to others who are thinking of beginning such a program. Above all else, we would stress the importance of continually evaluating the needs that arise within one's geographic region and institution, as well as across the students who will be the distance learners. Nothing about distance learning is static. As technology develops, needs change and new problems arise. Those who venture forth must do so with an attitude to embrace change, with the analytical skills to evaluate program data and make modifications, and, perhaps most important, a sense of humor.

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